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ABSTRACT

Businesses are increasingly making inroads into the classroom, particularly in underfunded schools. The dramatic rise in commercial activities in schools has sparked intense public debate, triggering a U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) report and various regulatory attempts at district, state, and federal levels. This digest offers an overview of commercial activities in schools, discusses ethical and legal issues, offers policy guidelines, and highlights strategies for negotiating contracts in line with the needs and values of schools. The GAO identified four types of commercial activities in schools: product sales, direct advertising, indirect advertising, and market research. Ethical concerns include children being forced to view advertising in the classroom, marketing of unhealthful food and drinks, and invasion of student privacy, some or all of this done without informed parental consent. Some Internet policy recommendations are that children under age 13 should not provide personal information, that teachers should analyze sites for appropriateness before letting students use them for research, and that they should guide Internet research to limit students' exposure to banner advertising. Strategies for cultivating sponsorship arrangements include setting educational goals and a timeline for the sponsorship, and frequently assessing sponsorship activities. (RT)

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Commercialism in Schools

by Kirstin Larson

Businesses are increasingly making inroads into the classroom, particularly in underfunded schools. In exchange for advertising space and marketing research, businesses provide money, teaching materials, technology resources, and sports equipment. Since 1990, commercial activity in schools has risen 473 percent (Molnar and Reaves 2001).

The dramatic rise in commercial activities in schools has sparked intense public debate, triggering a U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) report and a spate of regulatory attempts at district, state, and federal levels (Shaul 2000).

Opponents of commercialism in the classroom view the practice as something akin to the Hansel and Gretel tale, in which companies offer nourishment to children, only to "cook" their minds with advertising and consume their attention, opinions, and money. Defenders, on the other hand, view these exchanges as natural symbiotic relationships that benefit both businesses and children. As the public debate intensifies over commercial activities in schools, cash-strapped districts are increasingly finding themselves caught in the middle.

This Digest offers an overview of commercial activities in schools, discusses ethical and legal issues, offers policy guidelines, and highlights strategies for negotiating contracts in line with the needs and values of schools.

What Types of Commercial Activities Are Taking Place in Schools?

The GAO (Shaul) identified four types of commercial activities in schools:

- Product sales (for example, exclusive contracts for soft drinks) approach students as immediate on-site consumers and as future consumers.
- Direct advertising (such as posters in corridors) approaches students as off-site consumers, future consumers, and consumer influencers, for example, influencing the purchasing decisions of parents and friends.
- Indirect advertising (for example, educational materials sponsored by a corporation or trade association) approaches students as off-site consumers and future consumers.
- Market research (taste tests, online profiling) approaches students as representative consumers, that is, consumers whose preferences have demographic significance for marketers.

Businesses often engage in two or more types of commercial activities in schools. For example, product sales such as exclusive vending contracts with soft-drink bottlers may be accompanied by the display of a corporate logo on vending machines. Or technology providers may place banner ads on education-oriented websites as well as conduct market research on students online.

What Are Some of the Ramifications of Corporate Sponsorships?

The GAO found that revenue from "the most common and lucrative type of commercial activities"—soft-drink sales through exclusive vending contracts and short-term fundraising events—represented only a small percentage of districts' overall budgets (Shaul).

Even though corporate sponsorship provides "just a drop in the bucket compared to the real needs of public education," Fege and Hagelshaw (2000) warn that the cost may include a compromised learning environment, parental and community protest, and litigation.

Commercial activities in schools can incur costs that outweigh their financial benefits. Sawicky and Molnar (1998) report, for example, what they claim is the true cost of Channel One, a daily televised ten-minute newscast beamed by satellite to some 12,000 secondary schools enrolling more than eight million students: "On average, twelve daily minutes of a secondary school's time costs almost $158,000 a year. This cost is far in excess of both the total value of Channel One's equipment ($17,000) and the annual rental value of the equipment ($4,000) in every state."

Corporate sponsorship can backfire when the public underestimates the needs of schools that have turned to corporate sponsors (Hagelshaw, in Merrow 1999). Communities can become accustomed to private funding of their schools, making fundraising in the public sector more difficult. "The more that schools resort to private enterprise as a source of funding for public education, the less the school board, state legislature, and Congress feel obligated to allocate from the public purse" (Fege and Hagelshaw).

What Ethical and Legal Issues Are Raised by In-School Commercialism?

Ethical issues are at the heart of public concern over the effects of commercial activities on schoolchildren. Critics are especially concerned with in-school commercial activities that

- force children to view advertising in the classroom
- market unhealthful food and drinks to children
- masquerade as educational materials, activities, or programs
- invade students' privacy as a condition of participating in technology-related learning activities
- use children as market research subjects
- take place without the informed consent of parents

Such practices, critics argue, exploit a captive audience, violate public trust, and undermine schools' ability to teach children essential skills such as critical discernment, healthful eating habits, and safe behavior on the Internet.

The growth of commercialism in schools appears to have outpaced laws and regulations at state and federal levels. Only nineteen states have adopted laws to regulate commercial activities in the classroom, and these laws vary widely in specificity and intent. Some laws permit, rather than prohibit, specific commercial activities in schools (Shaul).

At the federal level, The Better Nutrition for School Children Act of 2001 limits the availability of junk food and soda in schools and increases the U.S. Department of Agriculture's authority over school-lunch programs. The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 protects children under thirteen years of age from infringement of their privacy by commercial websites (Willard 2000).

Moreover, many schools will be required to comply with the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), enacted in 2000, which seeks to protect minors who use the Internet from being exposed to por-

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nography and other inappropriate material. Enacted as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2001, the CIPA statute applies to "all schools receiving funding through the E-rate program and technology funding through Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act" (Willard 2001).

How Should a School Policy Address In-School Commercialism?

When evaluating technology resources for classroom use, Willard (2000) suggests asking, "Is advertising the vehicle to support the delivery of a high quality educational resource, or has the educational resource been established for the purpose of advertising, brand promotion, or corporate promotion?" Willard (2000) also recommends that schools specifically address commercialism on the Internet through policy provisions such as the following:

- Students under thirteen years of age should not provide personal information such as name, address, or other contact information on the Internet unless the information is for an approved, legitimate educational purpose.
- When teachers select sites for student research, the sites should be analyzed for quality, appropriateness, and suitability of educational content, and reviewed for the presence of banner ads.
- Teachers should guide the research activities of students to limit their exposure to banner advertising.

The National Association of State Boards of Education (2000) cautions that exclusive vending contracts, or "pouring rights," should never include incentives for increasing students' consumption of unhealthy foods and drinks. NASBE also recommends the following contract provisions:

- Fruit juice, bottled water, and food items with nutritional value must compose a certain proportion of the products offered for sale.
- Fruit juice, bottled water, and nutritious food items must be sold at attractive prices.
- Soft-drink serving sizes must be moderate.
- The vendor must help sponsor promotional materials and events to encourage healthful eating habits.

NASBE provides detailed policy guidelines in *Fit, Healthy, and Ready To Learn* (Bogden and Vega-Matos 2000).

How Can Schools Negotiate Better Sponsorships?

As more businesses compete for access to children, schools and districts may be in a better position to negotiate arrangements that respect their educational values and goals. Schools may be able to demand less controversial sponsorships in exchange for higher quality resources. In return, businesses could expect to gain tax breaks for their donations and a positive image in the community.

Following are some strategies for cultivating sponsorship arrangements that meet school needs and standards:

- Set specific educational goals, together with a time line, for the sponsorship.
- Design a school policy on commercial activities in schools in advance and include parents and the larger community in the process: "Drawing the line between the public and private interest before the first marketer targets your school or district, and involving your community in this important discussion, can prevent community dissension, parental protest, and possible litigation after the fact (Fege and Hagelshaw).
- Consider a variety of potential sponsors.
- Research each company's past interactions with schools, including community, teacher, and student response; impact on the educational environment; whether students were approached as learners or as consumers; percentage of profits shared with schools (if appropriate); and past lobbying efforts that may have had an impact on educational programs and funding.
- Network and share information with other schools, districts, and states, as well as national education organizations. If possible, adopt a shared set of guidelines for interactions with businesses.
- Seek contracts that guarantee your school's or district's satisfaction and that do not penalize your school for withdrawing for any reason or at any time.
- To avoid the possibility of overdependence on funds from the business community, clearly delineate a phasing-out process. Schools might even consider enlisting active support for adequate public funding from local businesses.
- Never force a child to participate in a sponsorship-related activity.
- Once the sponsorship is under way, frequently assess activities, taking into account responses from teachers, students, parents, and the larger community.
- Publicly acknowledge businesses' efforts that are respectful of the values and standards of the school or district.

Many foundations and organizations do not require "the commercial quid pro quo" (Fege and Hagelshaw). Schools might, moreover, consider fund development, "an approach long practiced by colleges and universities... but seldom attempted by elementary and middle schools," write Stephens and others (2000). They explain planned giving, grants, and creative fundraising, and provide resources that can help principals locate funding sources.

Resources

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